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Editorial: Increased spending on land needs oversight

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Issue:

February 18, 2007

Preservation proposal

Gov. Jim Doyle's proposal to ramp up the fund to preserve natural areas and wildlife habitat in the state is commendable for its respect of our natural resources. But it's questionable in its timing and its political sense.

Doyle wants to increase spending under the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund from \$60 million to \$105 million, beginning in 2011. With property values increasing, Doyle reasons, more money will be needed to add to the 477,000 acres that the program has preserved since its inception in 1989.

But his proposal comes with red flags.

Suggesting a 75 percent hike in program funding when the state is on the verge of a serious budget struggle raises questions about timing.

"My first reaction is that it's lavish," said Sen. Robert Cowles, R-Allouez. "It's unreasonable in the context of the budget dilemma we're in. How in the world he can put that much on the table now is hard to understand. Is this really the time to go wild on bonding?"

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, named for former Govs. Warren Knowles and Gaylord Nelson, has helped the state preserve some impressive sites, both through the Department of Natural Resources acquisitions and through nonprofit conservation organizations.

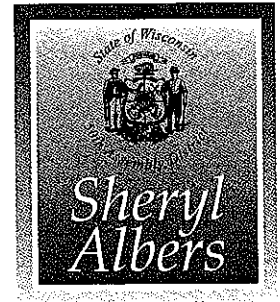
The Mink River Estuary in Door County is owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy, and the Bayshore Bluff near Ellison Bay is in the hands of the Door County Land Trust. Among the purchases protected by the DNR are 70 miles of Peshtigo River frontage in Marinette and Oconto counties.

Missing from Doyle's dream of funding more land purchases is any plan for oversight. Lawmakers lost their ability to review the program in 2003, despite the fact that the money to pay for land purchases must come from the state's general purpose revenue. The Joint Finance Committee needs to re-enter the picture.

"There used to be some oversight," Cowles said. "It's irresponsible not to have some checks on the system."

We agree. It's one thing to tempt state residents with the prospect of maintaining more of the natural landscape, but these proposals must be weighed in light of the state's bond debt, which has grown considerably under both Doyle and former Gov. Scott McCallum.

If we're to preserve more land, we need to know what we'll give up in return.



Testimony of Rep. Sheryl Albers
Assembly Bill 93 – Stewardship Oversight
Assembly Committee on Property Rights
May 2, 2007

Thank you Madame Chair and members for holding a public hearing on Assembly Bill 93; I appreciate the opportunity to testify today. This bill would restore legislative oversight, and put in place stronger checks and balances, of the stewardship fund.

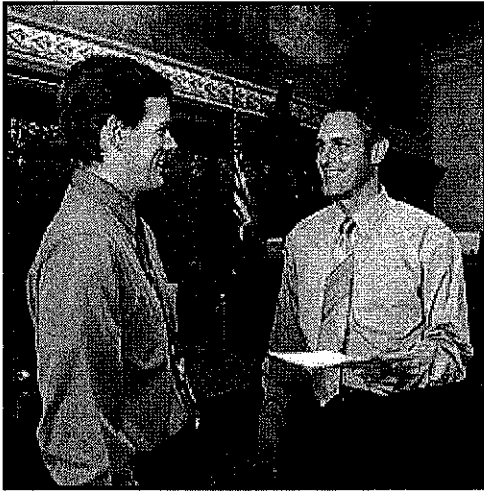
The DNR has routinely purchased land for over 800% of its assessed value and that is disrespectful of Wisconsin taxpayers. It's like paying a million dollars for a house worth \$120,000. At that rate everyone with land to sell should sell to the DNR because you'll never get a better deal than they will offer. We need legislative oversight to halt this outrageous action. Assembly Bill 93 is about restoring responsible purchasing through the stewardship fund and being respectful of taxpayers.

The Stewardship program is funded with general obligation bond borrowing. The Program's credit limit started at \$231 million in 1990 and was increased to \$803 million in 2001 and in the current budget that amount is raised to \$1.85 billion. The annual payments on this debt will exceed the credit limit four years from now. This means we will be paying over a million dollars a week in debt service for the Program. Right now in Wisconsin 22% of the land in Wisconsin is publicly owned, which means, in most circumstances, no one pays property taxes on it. Aids in lieu of taxes must be paid each year coming out of general revenue, thus the legislature needs to know and be the check and balance on what amount is being spent on each parcel of land.

Historically, the Legislature had the authority to review major purchases. Governor Doyle stripped this authority away with a creative use of the veto pen in the 2003 budget, effectively creating new sentences by vetoing individual words out of them. Now the only way to ensure that funds spent under the stewardship program are spent responsibly is to restore some type of external oversight to the program. The power of the purse belongs with the legislature.

I would hope that the committee will consider restoring responsibility to the process and move AB 93 out of committee and on to the full Assembly for a vote.

Thank you again for holding this public hearing. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



Lasee's Notes

March 6, 2007

Frank discussing legislation with a staff member on the Floor of the Assembly.

Hey, Brother, Can You Spare An Acre?

I appeared on a weekly current events television show last night in Milwaukee and one of the topics was the Democrat budget proposal and how the increased taxes and spending in it will impact families. As I drove to Madison after the show, I started to think about other things in the budget that cause our property taxes to go up, aside from new taxes and new spending.

The Stewardship Program was started nearly two decades ago "to preserve Wisconsin's most significant land and water resources for future generations and to provide the land base and recreational facilities needed for quality outdoor experiences. These goals are achieved by acquiring land and easements for conservation and recreation purposes, developing and improving recreational facilities, and restoring wildlife habitat." (Source: [Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources web site](#))

Those are noble goals. I like the Stewardship Program. I like that we are preserving our natural resources for our children and grandchildren. I wish the DNR would let the people paying for the Stewardship property use it for things like hunting and fishing a little bit more than they do, but overall the Program is a good idea.

The question is: how much is enough? When have we bought enough land?

The Program is funded with general obligation bond borrowing. The Program's credit limit started at \$231 million in 1990 and was increased to \$803 million in 2001 and the Democrats want to raise it to **\$1.85 billion** in this budget. The annual credit limit was \$25 million, is \$60 million and now the Democrats want to raise it to \$105 million per year.

The annual payments on this debt will exceed the credit limit four years from now. This means we will be paying over a million dollars a week in debt service for the Program and borrowing \$2 million a week if the Democrats have their way.

How much of Wisconsin is owned by the government, anyway?

The federal government owns nearly 2 million acres in Wisconsin, for national parks, forests and trust lands. The DNR owns more than a million acres, and the state's 72 counties own nearly 2.4 million acres for the same purposes. In the 18 counties which make up the northern part of the state one acre out of every three is government owned. In fact, publicly owned forests, parks, trust lands, fisheries, recreational areas, and preserves add up to nearly 6 million acres – **14% of the state's total acreage, which is nearly 1 out of every 6 in the state.**

Add in the land under public buildings (schools, courthouses, universities, etc.), but not underneath roads, and the figure jumps to 22%. **More than one out of every five acres is government owned in Wisconsin.**

22 % of the land in Wisconsin is publicly owned, which means, in most circumstances, no one pays property taxes on it. Your property taxes are being used to buy up more tax revenue generating land and take it off the tax rolls. All this is happening while state (and local, for the most part) government spending rises.

So, we reduce our property tax revenue pool (and spend money to do it) while regular state spending and borrowing grows and grows. Which taxpayers are going to fund all this?

Wisconsin should continue the Stewardship Program. Our state should spend \$20 to \$30 million per year, keeping the best lands for public use. We should sell the less attractive parcels the state has already acquired.

This is another example of a great state program that has grown too big. We need to balance our desire to preserve our land for the future with the taxpayers' ability to pay. I ask you: **how much of our state should the government own?**

What do you think about this issue? Click on this [link](#) and send me an email with your thoughts.

Lasee's Notes is a weekly column by Representative Frank Lasee, 2nd Assembly District, covering events in the Legislature and statewide.

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